



Nymphet Fantasies: Child Beauty Pageants and the Politics of Innocence

Author(s): Henry A. Giroux

Source: *Social Text*, Winter, 1998, No. 57 (Winter, 1998), pp. 31-53

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/466880>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/466880?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Text*

JSTOR

Only in a climate of denial could hysteria over satanic rituals at daycare centers coexist with a failure to grasp the full extent of child abuse. (More than 8.5 million women and men are survivors.) Only in a culture that represses the evidence of the senses could child pageantry grow into a \$5 billion dollar industry without anyone noticing. Only in a nation of promiscuous puritans could it be a good career move to equip a six-year-old with bedroom eyes.

—Richard Goldstein, *Village Voice*, 24 June 1997

Henry A. Giroux

The Disappearing Child and the Politics of Innocence

The notion of the disappearing child and the myth of childhood innocence often mirror and support each other. Within the myth of innocence, children are often portrayed as inhabiting a world that is untainted, magical, and utterly protected from the harshness of adult life. Innocence in this scenario not only erases the complexities of childhood and the range of experiences different children encounter, but it also offers an excuse for adults to evade responsibility for how children are firmly connected to and shaped by the social and cultural institutions run largely by adults. Innocence in this instance makes children invisible except as projections of adult fantasies—fantasies that allow adults to believe that children do not suffer from their greed, recklessness, perversions of will and spirit, and that they are, in the final analysis, unaccountable.¹

If innocence provides the moral ethos that distinguishes children from adults, the discourse of the disappearing child signals that childhood is being threatened by forces that tend to collapse that distinction. For example, in cultural critic Neil Postman's thoroughly modernist view of the world, the electronic media, especially television, presents a threat to the existence of children and the civilized culture bequeathed to the West by the Enlightenment.² Not only does the very character of television—its fast-paced format, sound-byte worldview, information overload, and narrative organization—undermine the very possibility for children to engage in critical thinking, but its content works to expel images of the child from its programming by both "adultifying" the child and promoting the rise of the "childfied" adult.³ But Postman is quick to extend his thesis to other spheres, noting, for example, the disappearance of children's cloth-

Social Text 57, Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter 1998. Copyright © 1998 by Duke University Press.

ing and children's games, the entry of children into professional sports, and the increasing willingness of the criminal justice system to treat children as miniature adults. Postman's lament represents less a concern with preserving childhood innocence than with bemoaning the passing of a world in which high culture is threatened by popular culture, and the culture of print loses its hold on a restricted notion of literacy and citizenship training. The loss of childhood innocence in this scenario registers the passing of a historical and political juncture in which children could be contained and socialized under the watchful tutelage of dominant regulatory institutions such as the family, school, and church.

The specter of the child as an endangered species has also been appropriated by many politicians eager to establish themselves as protectors of childhood innocence. In their rush to implement new social and economic policies, numerous politicians, including President Clinton, hold up children as both the inspiration for and prime beneficiaries of their reforms. Lacking opportunities to vote, mobilize, or register their opinions, young children become an easy target and referent in the discourse of moral uplift and social legitimation. They also become pawns and victims. Far from benefiting children, many of the programs and government reforms enacted by Clinton and the Republican-led Congress represent what Senator Edward Kennedy has called "legislative child abuse."⁴ Protecting the innocence of children in this case has a direct connection with the disappearing child, though not in the sense predicted by Neil Postman. The draconian cuts in welfare reform enacted in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act are having a devastating effect on a great number of poor families and their children. While welfare roles have declined since 1996, a report released by the National Conference of State Legislatures indicates that 40 to 60 percent of the poor people who leave welfare obtain employment, but often at below poverty-level wages. Moreover, substantial numbers of children with disabilities have had their assistance terminated. Meanwhile, thousands of families are losing welfare aid because of penalties for noncompliance with new welfare reform rules, and the majority who lose benefits do not find work. Harsh compliance measures, substandard work, inadequate child care, marginal employment, low wages, and lack of adequate transportation for poor families all combine to make a mockery of welfare reform.⁵ In this instance, children are indeed disappearing—right into the hole of poverty, suffering, and despair.⁶ In short, the discourse of innocence suggests a concern for all children but often ignores or disparages the conditions under which many children are forced to live, especially children marginalized by class or race who, in effect, are generally excluded from the privileging and protective invocation of innocence.

Removed from its original concern with the welfare of all children,

politicians have little interest in the welfare of kids who are poor and non-white. Under these circumstances, innocence emerges less as a trope to highlight the disappearance of kids than as a metaphor for advancing a conservative political agenda based on so-called family values, in which middle-class white children are viewed as more valued and deserving of the material resources and cultural goods of the larger society than are those who are poor and nonwhite.⁷ In this selective appropriation, innocence turns with a vengeance on its humanitarian impulse: the everyday experience of childhood is held hostage to the realities of power and the disingenuous rhetoric of political pragmatism.

As the rhetoric of child welfare heats up in the public consciousness, innocence is increasingly being redeployed to rearticulate which specific children are deserving of entitlements and adult protection and what forces pose a threat to such children. Shot through with political and ideological values, innocence is not merely selective about which children are endangered and need to be protected; it also is used to signal who and what constitutes a threat to children.

As the child is increasingly used as a moral yardstick by politicians, the popular press, and the media, it becomes more difficult for adults to elide responsibility for what they do to kids. Consequently, childhood innocence appears both threatened and threatening. According to popular wisdom, the enemies of children are not to be found in the halls of Congress, in the poisonous advertisements that commodify and sexualize young children, or even in the endless media bashing that blames children for all of society's ills.⁸ On the contrary, the biggest threat to children is to be found in the child molesters, pedophiles, abductors, and others who prey on children in the most obscene ways imaginable. In this instance, the discourse of childhood innocence does more than produce the rhetoric of political opportunism; it also provides the basis for moral panic. Both conservatives and liberals have fed off the frenzy of fear associated with a decade of revelations of alleged child abuse. Starting with the 1987 McMartin preschool case, a wave of fear-inspired legislation has swept the nation in order to protect children from pedophiles, child molesters, predatory priests and teachers, and anyone else who might be labeled as a sexual deviant posing a threat to the innocence of children.⁹ Child abuse in this scenario is reduced to the individual pathology of the molester and pedophile; the fear and anger it arouses are so great that the Supreme Court is willing to suspend certain constitutional liberties in order to keep sexual predators locked up even after they finish serving their sentences.¹⁰

But the issue of widespread child abuse has done more than inspire a national fear of child molesters. It points beyond the language of individual pathology to the more threatening issue of how society treats its children, exposing the degree to which society has failed to provide children

with the security and resources necessary to insure their safety and well-being. The most disturbing threat to innocence may be child abuse, but it is not a form of abuse that can only be assessed through the horrible behavior of sexual predators. Such abuse needs to be situated within a broader set of political, economic, and social considerations, considerations that probe deeply into the cultural formations that not only make children visible markers of humanity and public responsibility but also see children as a menacing enemy, or as merely a market to be exploited. The social investment in children's innocence may be at the center of political rhetoric in the halls of Congress, but there are other forces in American society that aggressively breed a hatred and disregard for children, especially those who are marginalized because of their class, race, gender, or status as non-U.S. citizens.

In what follows, I argue that the central threat to childhood innocence lies not in the figure of the pedophile or sexual predator but in the diminishing public spheres available for children to experience themselves as critical agents. That is, they must be able to develop their capacities for individual and social development free from the debilitating burdens of hunger, poor health care, and dilapidated schools, while simultaneously being provided with fundamental social services such as state protection from abusive parents. As cities become increasingly ghettoized because of the ravaging effects of deindustrialization, loss of revenue, and white flight, children are left with fewer services to fulfill their needs and desires. As the public schools are abandoned or surrendered to the dictates of the market, children increasingly find themselves isolated and removed from the discourses of community and compassion. As the state is hollowed out and only the most brutal state apparatuses remain intact, children have fewer opportunities to protect themselves from an adult world that offers them dwindling resources, dead-end jobs, and diminished hopes for the future.¹¹ At the same time, children are increasingly subjected to social and economic forces that exploit them through the dynamics of sexualization, commodification, and commercialization throughout vast segments of the culture.¹²

JonBenet Ramsey, Race, and the Perils of Home

While the concept of innocence may incite adults to publicly proclaim their support for future generations, it more often than not protects them from the reality of society and the influence they have in contributing to the ever increasing impoverishment of children's lives. Of course, there are often flash points in a society that signal that children are in danger and that certain elements in the culture pose a threat to their innocence. Con-

servatives, for example, have focused on the dangers to children presented by rap music, cinematic violence, and drugs to launch an attack on Hollywood films, the fashion world, single teen moms, and what it calls the cultural elite. But rarely do conservatives and the dominant press focus on social practices that locate the ongoing threats to children at the center of dominant economic, political, and cultural institutions. Poverty, racism, sexism, and the dismantling of the welfare state do great harm to children, but most of the stories exemplifying the effects of these social conditions either do not get reported in the press or if they do prompt little public discussion or self-examination.

One recent exception can be found in the case of JonBenet Ramsey, the six-year-old who was found strangled in her wealthy parents' Boulder, Colorado, home the day after Christmas in 1996. Throughout the first half of 1997, the case became a fixation in the press. Major media networks, newspapers, and tabloids besieged the public with photographs and television footage of JonBenet, dubbed as the slain little beauty queen, posing coquettishly in a tight dress, wearing bright red lipstick, her hair a bleached blonde. The JonBenet Ramsey case revealed once again that the media gravitate toward victims that fit the dominant culture's image of itself. Children who are white, blonde, middle class are not only invested with more humanity but become emblematic of a social order that banishes from consciousness any recognition of abused children who "don't fit the image of purity defiled."¹³

Consider the case of a nine-year-old African American child, labeled in the press as Girl X. Girl X was raped, beaten, blinded, and dumped in a stairwell in the run-down Cabrini Green Housing Project in Chicago. The brutal murder aroused a great deal of publicity in Chicago but was virtually ignored by the national media. Race and poverty relegated the case of Girl X to a nonentity. But there is something equally disturbing about the JonBenet case. Innocence is primarily applied to children who are white and middle class, often tucked away in urban townhouses and the safe sanctuaries of segregated suburban America. Innocence also mystifies the sexualization and commodification of young girls who are being taught to identify themselves through the pleasures and desires of the adult gaze. The child becomes the principle incitement to adult desire, but the pedagogical and commercial practices at work in such a construction remain unexamined because they take place within acceptable cultural forms such as children's beauty pageants. JonBenet's murder jolts the public because it shatters the assumption that the primary threat to innocence lies outside the family in the image of the sexual pervert. This murder also challenges the assumption that privileged families are immune to accusations of child abuse or neglect. The death of the young beauty queen raises serious questions about those forces at work in the cultural

JonBenet's
murder jolts the
public because it
shatters the
assumption that
the primary
threat to
innocence lies
outside the family
in the image
of the sexual
pervert.

practices and institutions of everyday life that organize children's lives, often in ways that undermine the possibility for children to enter adulthood free of violence, intimidation, and abuse along the way.

I will argue that the beauty pageant is an exemplary site for examining critically how the discourse of innocence mystifies the appropriation of children's bodies in a society that increasingly sexualizes and commodifies them. In pursuing this argument, I will examine how the culture of child beauty pageants functions as a pedagogical site where children learn about pleasure, desire, and the roles they might assume in an adult society. I also will examine how such pageants are rationalized, how they are upheld by commercial and ideological structures within the broader society, and how they are reproduced, reinforced, and sustained in related spheres such as advertising and fashion photography—spheres that also play an important role in marketing children as objects of pleasure, desire, and sexuality. Underlying this project is the attempt to challenge such rituals as innocent, to reconsider the role they play as part of a broader cultural practice in which children are reified and objectified. This is not meant to suggest that all child beauty pageants engage in a form of child abuse. Pageants vary in both the way they are constructed and how they interact with local and national audiences. Moreover, their outcomes are variable and contingent. But as sites of representation, identity formation, consumption, and regulation, the dominant and assigned meanings attached to these events have to be understood in terms of how they articulate and resonate with other cultural sites engaged in the production and regulation of youth, the packaging of desire, and the sexualized body.

Beauty Pageants and the Shock of the Real

The Ramsey case challenges and disrupts ideological conventions that typically apply to narratives of childhood innocence. This seems to have been the case during the blitz of media coverage following the brutal murder of six-year-old JonBenet Ramsey. On one level, JonBenet's case attracted national attention because it fed into the frenzy and moral panic Americans are experiencing over the threat of child abuse—fueled by horrific crimes like the kidnap and murder of Polly Klaas in California. Similarly, it resonated with the highly charged public campaigns by various legislators and citizen groups calling for the death penalty for sex offenders such as Jesse Timmendequas, the child molester who killed seven-year-old Megan Kanka. On another level, it opened to public scrutiny another high-profile example of a child succeeding at the make-believe game of becoming an adult. Not unlike Jessica Dubroff, the seven-year-old would-be Amelia Earhart who, while attempting to be the youngest

pilot to cross the United States, died tragically in a plane crash, JonBenet Ramsey also projected the aura of a child with the uncanny ability to present herself as an adult. But if the boundary between innocence and impurity, child and adult, became blurred in both cases, JonBenet's notoriety as an object of public fascination revealed a dark and seamy element in the culture.

Night after night the major television networks aired videotapes of little JonBenet Ramsey wearing tight, off-the-shoulder dresses, bright red lipstick, and curled, teased, and bleached blond hair pulling a feathered Mardi Gras mask almost seductively across her eyes as she sashayed down a runway. Playing the role of an alluring sex kitten, JonBenet seemed to belie the assumption that the voyeuristic fascination with the sexualized child was confined to the margins of society, inhabited largely by freaks and psychopaths.

The JonBenet Ramsey case revealed not only how regressive notions of femininity and beauty are redeployed in this conservative era to fashion the fragile identities of young girls, but also how easily adults will project their own fantasies onto children, even if it means selling them on the beauty block. The JonBenet case offered the public a spectacle in which it became both a voyeur and a witness to its refusal to address the broader conditions that contribute to the sexualization and commodification of kids in the larger culture. With the recent attention generated by celebrities such as Roseanne Barr and Oprah Winfrey, the general public has come to recognize that child abuse often takes place at home and that the image of the child molester as strictly an outsider has become less credible. The image of the home as a safe space for children was also problematized as it became clear that the Ramseys imposed their own strange fantasies on their daughter and in doing so denied her an identity suitable for a six-year-old. Instead, they positioned her within a child beauty pageant culture that stripped her of her innocence by blurring the boundary between child and adult. Not allowed to be a child, JonBenet was given the unfortunate job of projecting herself through a degrading aesthetic that sexualized and commodified her. Collapsing the (hardly clear-cut) boundaries between the protective parental gaze and the more objectified adult gaze, JonBenet's parents appear to have stripped their daughter of any sense of agency in order to remake her in the image of their own desires and pleasures. Parental "care" in this case appears to have been waged tyrannically to prevent JonBenet from experiencing childhood pleasures and needs outside the commodifying gaze of pleasure-seeking, narcissistic adults.

Images of six-year-olds cosmetically transformed into sultry, Lolita-like waifs are difficult to watch. Such images strike at the heart of a culture beset by a deep disturbance in its alleged respect for children and decency.

Whereas the blame for the often violent consequences associated with this eroticized costuming is usually placed on young women, the JonBenet Ramsey affair makes it difficult to blame kids for this type of objectification and commodification. The usual demonization and attack on kids in the public mind suggesting they are responsible for society's ills breaks down in this case as it becomes more difficult for adults to elide responsibility for what they do to children—their own and others.¹⁴ JonBenet's image violently transgresses a sacred responsibility associated with protecting the innocence of children. Writ large across the media coverage of the JonBenet case was the disturbing implication and recognition that childhood innocence is assaulted when children can no longer expect from adults “protection . . . consistency and some sort of dignity.”¹⁵

The JonBenet Ramsey case prompted an unusual debate in the media and national press. Lacking the theoretical tools or political will to analyze the institutional and ideological forces in the culture that generate such disregard for children, the media focused on what was often termed “the strange subculture of child beauty pageants” and more often than not suggested that the abuse children suffered in such pageants was due to overbearing mothers trying to control their daughters' lives. It seems that if young girls are unavailable for scapegoating, their mothers make up for the loss. Rarely did the media raise the larger issue of how young girls are being educated to function within a limited notion of public life or how such a regressive education for young girls was more often than not the norm rather than the exception.

The traditional moral guardians of children's culture who would censor rap lyrics, remove “dangerous” videos and CDs from public circulation, boycott Disney for pro-gay and lesbian labor practices, and empty school libraries of many classic texts have had little to say about the sexualization of young children in a social form as American-as-apple-pie as children's beauty pageants. Nor are they willing to acknowledge that such pageants must be regarded within a broader set of competitive childhood practices and formations such as youth sport events that appeal to working- and middle-class parents who seem willing to sacrifice their children's welfare to the imperatives of success and celebrity. Amidst the silence by conservatives and the family values crowd, liberal and progressive reporters have begun to raise some important questions. For example, CBS anchorman Dan Rather criticized the television networks for running the JonBenet tapes on the air, claiming that they amounted to nothing less than kiddy porn. Frank Rich wrote a courageous piece in the *New York Times* in which he argued that the “strange world of kids' pageantry is not a ‘subculture’—it's our culture. But as long as we call it a subculture, it can remain a problem for somebody else.”¹⁶ Richard Goldstein followed up Rich's insights with a three-part series in the *Village Voice* in which he

argued that the marketing of the sexual child has a long history in the United States and that the JonBenet case “brings to the surface both our horror at how effectively a child can be constructed as a sexual being and our guilt at the pleasure we take in such a sight.”¹⁷ For Goldstein, the JonBenet case challenges the American public to confront the actual nature of child abuse, which is all too often a part of family life and further legitimated in the hateful practices of a culture willing to capitalize on children as the new arena for the production of pleasure and commodification.

All of these critiques raise valid concerns about the role of child beauty pageants and how they produce particular notions of beauty, pleasure, and femininity that are as culturally gender-specific as they are degrading; such criticisms also prompt a debate about the nature of adult needs and desires that push kids into pageants, and how such pageants correspond with other social practices that “silently” reproduce roles for children that undermine the notion of child innocence and reinforce particular forms of child abuse. In what follows, I examine these issues in detail by focusing on the scope and popularity of children’s beauty pageants, what they attempt to teach young girls, and the broader commercial forces that sustain them. I also locate the phenomenon of child beauty pageants within a broader, related set of cultural practices, especially the world of high-fashion advertising and the rise of the teenage model in the world of high fashion.

Beauty and the Beast: A Genealogy of Child Beauty Pageants

Frank Rich insightfully argues that child beauty pageants represent more than a subculture in American society. Ted Cohen, president of World Pageants Inc., which publishes an international directory of pageants, estimates that the pageantry industry represents a billion-dollar-a-year industry, with sponsors such as Proctor and Gamble, Black Velvet, and Hawaiian Tropics.¹⁸ It is estimated that more than three thousand pageants a year are held in the United States in which more than one hundred thousand children under the age of twelve compete.¹⁹ In some cases, children as young as eight months are entered in pageants. California, Florida, and New York hold the most pageants, and the number of pageants in the United States appears to be growing, in spite of the fact that many contests, especially at the national level, charge contestants between \$250 to \$800 to enter.²⁰ Most of the contestants who enter local pageants are from working-class families driven by mobility fantasies and the lure of a small cash prize. The larger and more expensive pageants appear to be dominated by middle- and upper-class parents like the Ramseys, who have lots

The popular
 literature that
 supports the
 pageant culture
 fails to
 acknowledge that
 "sexualized
 images of little
 girls may have
 dangerous
 implications in a
 world where
 450,000
 American children
 were reported
 as victims of
 sexual abuse
 in 1993."

of money and resources to spend on costly voice and dance lessons, pageant coaches, expensive costumes, and pageant entry fees.

Pageants are a lucrative business. Promoters market pleasure and rake in big dividends, with some making as much as \$100,000 on each event. In addition, child beauty pageants have produced a number of support industries, including costume designers, grooming consultants, interview coaches, photographers, and publishers,²¹ not to mention the cosmetics, weight reduction, and other "beauty-aid industries." Trade magazines such as *Pageant Life*, which has a circulation of sixty thousand, offer their readers a range of images and advertisements celebrating ideals of femininity, glamour, and beauty, while marketing young girls in the image of adult drives and desires. In some cases, parents invest big money for makeup artists, hairstylists, and coaches to teach prepubescent kids particular modeling styles and tornado spins.²² A story that appeared in *Life* in 1994, featuring Blaire, an eleven-year-old seasoned beauty pageant performer, documented this trend. Blaire's fortunes at winning got better when her mom and dad hired Tony, a voice coach and makeup artist who charges \$40 an hour, to completely redesign her. When Blaire's father was asked why he was so involved with entering Blaire in child beauty pageants, he answered: "I am a plastic surgeon only from the neck up. I enjoy the beauty of the face. No doubt that's why I am so involved with Blaire." The article reports that "Bruce is captivated by his daughter's beauty but prefers it enhanced: He apologizes to strangers when she is not wearing makeup. Some parents have accused Bruce of enhancing Blaire's looks with surgery." Blaire indicates that she loves pageants, which are her only interests. The article ends by pointing out that Blaire lacks a child's spontaneity, and then conjectures that she "shows so little offstage emotion because she's so busy editing herself with adults."²³

Blaire's case may appear to some as a caricature of pageant life, narrowly depicting parents who push their kids too hard and who impose their own interests and desires on children too young to decide whether they actually want to participate in the pageants. But the popular literature on child beauty pageants is replete with such stories.²⁴ Many of the parents involved in these pageants do not seem concerned about the possible negative consequences of dressing their children in provocative clothing, capping their teeth, putting fake eyelashes on them, and having them perform before audiences in a manner that suggests a sexuality well beyond their years.

The popular literature that supports the child beauty pageant culture fails to acknowledge that "sexualized images of little girls may have dangerous implications in a world where 450,000 American children were reported as victims of sexual abuse in 1993."²⁵ Trade magazines such as *Pageant Life* and *Babette's Pageant and Talent Gazette* are filled with ads sponsored by companies such as Hawaiian Tropic in which toddlers strike

suggestive poses. Full-page spreads of contest finalists depict contestants ranging in age from two to twenty-four years. Despite this range, all of the entrants are defined by the same aesthetic: the makeup, pose, smile, and hairstyles of the six-year-olds are no different from those of the much older contestants. Within the beauty pageant aesthetic, the line between children and adults is blurred; all of the images depict the cool estrangement of sexual allure that has become a trademark in the commodities industry. In addition, the magazines are full of ads hawking pageant and talent clothes from companies called, for example, “Hollywood Babe” and “Little Starlet Fashions”—with many ads invoking the warning “Don’t Be Left Behind.”²⁶ One even gushes that contestants may enter a particular pageant for the fee of only \$1 per pound. Success stories for the younger-age set (four- to eight-year-olds) consistently focus on the thrill of competition, on winning titles, and on the successful modeling careers of the pageant winners.

Parents and sponsors who participate in these pageants often respond to public criticisms by arguing that the press overreacted to JonBenet Ramsey’s death by unfairly focusing on the beauty pageant as somehow being implicated in her murder. Others legitimate the child beauty pageant culture as a productive route to get their kids into lucrative careers such as modeling, or to win college scholarships, financial awards, and other prizes. The most frequently used rationale for defending pageants is that they build self-esteem in children, “help them to overcome shyness, and [teach them how] to grow up.”²⁷ One pageant director in Murrieta, California, refuted the criticism that pageants are detrimental for young girls, arguing that “many young girls look at pageants as a protracted game of dress up, something most young girls love.”²⁸ Another pageant participant, Pam Griffin, whose daughter trained JonBenet Ramsey, remarked that “more girls are trying pageants after seeing how much fun JonBenet had.”²⁹ Even *Vogue* reporter Ellen Mark concluded that most kids who participate in beauty pageants end up as success stories. The reason for their success, according to Mark, is that “pageants made them feel special. . . . Little girls like to look pretty.”³⁰

Appropriating the discourse of liberal feminism, this argument is often associated with attributes affirming self-direction, autonomy, and a strong competitive spirit. But what is often missing from such critiques is the recognition that self-esteem is being defined within a very narrow standard of autonomy, one that appears impervious to how gender is continually made and remade on the body within a politics of appearance that is often reduced to the level of a degrading spectacle. Self-esteem in this context means embracing rather than critically challenging a gender code that rewards little girls for their looks, submissiveness, and sex appeal. Coupled with the ways in which the broader culture, through television, music, magazines, and advertising, consistently bombards young girls

with a sexualized ideal of femininity “from which all threatening elements have been purged,”³¹ self-esteem often becomes a euphemism for self-hatred, rigid gender roles, and powerlessness.

There is a certain irony in appropriating the language of self-esteem to defend child beauty pageants, especially since the latter provide young children with standards of beauty that one of forty thousand young women will actually meet. Must we ask what’s wrong with young girls wanting to become fashion models who increasingly look as if they will never grow up (e.g., Kate Moss), and for whom beauty is not only defined by the male gaze but appears to be one of the few requisites to enter “into the privileged male world”?³² Naomi Wolf is right in arguing that the problem with linking standardized notions of sexualized beauty to self-esteem is that it doesn’t present young girls or adult woman with many choices, especially when issues regarding sexual pleasure and self-determination are held hostage to notions of femininity in which it becomes difficult for women to grow up and express themselves in a variety of public spaces.³³ Moreover, on the other side of the cheap glamorization of the waif-child as the fashion icon of beauty is the reality of a patriarchal society in which the nymphet fantasy reveals a “system by which men impose their authority on women and children alike.”³⁴

In short, rarely do the defenders of child beauty pageants comment critically about the consequences of stealing away a child’s innocence by portraying her in the suggestive pose of a sexualized nymphet. Once again, little is said about what children are actually learning in pageants, how a child might see herself and mediate her relationship to society when her sense of self-worth is defined largely through a notion of beauty that is one-dimensional and demeaning. Nor does there seem to be much self-reflection on the part of parents and other pageant participators in allowing children to be sponsored by corporations. The pedagogical message that often informs such relations is that the identities of the young girls who enter the pageants become meaningful only when tied to the logic of the market. What a young girl learns in this case is that “in order to enter [the] contest she must represent someone other than herself.”³⁵

Unlike pageants that took place ten or fifteen years ago, pageants, especially the national ones, now offer bigger prizes and are backed by corporate sponsors. Moreover, as the commercial interests and level of investment in such pageants have risen, so have their competitive nature along with the hype and glitz. V. J. LaCour, publisher of *Pageant Life* and a firm supporter of child beauty pageants, thinks that many parents have resorted to makeup and other “extreme” measures because they “are trying to get a competitive edge.”³⁶ In some cases, parents resort to measures that are mentally punitive and physically cruel to get their kids to perform “properly.” Lois Miller, owner of Star Talent Management in Allentown, Pennsylvania, reports that she has “seen parents who have pinched their

Henry A. Giroux

children for messing up their dress or not looking appropriate or not wiggling enough or not throwing kisses.”³⁷ Parents often respond to such criticisms by claiming that their kids are doing exactly what they want to do and that they enjoy being in the pageants. This argument appears strained when parents enter into pageants children who are as young as eight months, or when parents decide, as reported in *Money*, that their four-year-old child needed a talent agent in order to insure that she made the right connections outside of the beauty pageants.

Sixty Minutes, the television program highly acclaimed for its investigative reporting, aired a segment on child beauty pageants on 18 May 1997 in the aftermath of the JonBenet Ramsey controversy. The premise of the program, announced by Morley Safer at the beginning of the segment, was to explore if “child beauty pageants exploit children to satisfy ambitions of parents.” In order to provide a historical perspective on such pageants, *Sixty Minutes* aired cuts from child beauty pageants that had been seen on the program in 1977, and then presented videotaped shots of JonBenet and other children performing in a recent pageant. The contrast was both obscene and informative. The children in the 1977 pageants wore little-girl dresses and ribbons in their hair; they embodied a child-like innocence in their appearance as they displayed their little-girl talents—singing, tap dancing, and baton twirling. Not so with the more recent pageant shots. The contestants did not look like little girls but rather like coquettish young women whose talents were reduced to an ability to move suggestively across the stage. Clearly, as Morley Safer indicated, “By today’s beauty pageant standards, innocence seems to have vanished.” When he asked one of the stage mothers who had appeared in the 1977 program what she thought of today’s pageants, she responded that she recently went to a child beauty pageant and “walked in the door and walked out. It was disgusting to see the beaded dresses and blown-up hair on kids.” *Sixty Minutes*’s take on child beauty pageants was critical, yet it failed to consider the broader social practices, representations, and relations of power that provide the context for such pageants to flourish in the United States. Nor did it analyze the growing popularity of the pageants as part of a growing backlash against feminism reproduced in the media, culture, and fashion industries, as well as in a growing number of conservative economic and political establishments.³⁸ Morley Safer was, however, clear about the assumption that the root of such abuse toward children was to be placed squarely on the shoulders of overly ambitious and exploitative mothers.

But the feminist backlash has not stopped more informed criticisms from emerging. For example, some child psychologists argue that the intense competition at pageants and the nomadic lifestyle of traveling from one hotel to another when school is not in session make it difficult for young children to make friends, putting them at risk for developing a

The emergence
of cultural forms
such as the child
beauty pageant
makes clear the
degree to which
viable public
spheres are
diminishing for
children. . . .
Young people
find themselves
in a society
in which
there are very few
decommodified
public spheres for
them to identify
with and
experience.

number of problems in their social interactions with other children. Other child specialists argue that it is as developmentally inappropriate to “teach a six-year-old to pose like a twenty-year-old model as it is to allow her to drive [and] drink alcohol.”³⁹ Of course, there is also the stress of competition and the danger of undermining a child’s self-confidence, especially when she loses, if the message she receives is that how she looks is the most important aspect of who she is. Renowned psychologist David Elkind argues that parents used to be concerned with the ethical behavior of kids. A decade ago, when kids got home from school their parents asked them if they were good. Now, because of the new economic realities of downsizing and deindustrialization, parents are fearful that their kids will be losers.⁴⁰ Marly Harris writes that the “massive restructuring of the economy creates a winner-take-all society in which parents believe that if kids don’t end up as one of the few winners they will join the ranks of the many losers.”⁴¹ The question kids get when they come home in the 1990s is no longer “Have you been good?” but “Did you win?” Another criticism by Harris is that the money spent on child pageants by parents, up to \$10,000 per child a year in some cases, could be invested in more productive ways for kids, not the least of which could be a savings plan established to help young people alleviate the cost of a college education. Not only are kids objectified in this scenario, but the attributes accentuated in defining their identities and self-esteem offer them limited opportunities to develop and express themselves.⁴²

In spite of such criticisms, child beauty pageants are enormously popular in the United States, and their popularity is growing; moreover, they have their defenders.⁴³ In part, such popularity can be explained by their potential to make money for promoters, but there is more to the story. Children’s beauty contests also represent places where the rituals of small-town America combine with the ideology of mass consumer culture. Pageants with titles such as “Miss Catfish Queen,” “Miss Baby Poultry Princess,” and “The Snake Charmer Queen Ritual Competition” suggest that such rituals are easily adapted to “local meanings and familiar symbols, values, and aesthetics—those relevant to the producers, performers, and consumers of the contest.”⁴⁴ Such rituals are easy to put on, are advertised as a legitimate form of family entertainment, resonate powerfully with dominant Western models of femininity, beauty, and culture, and play a crucial role at the local and national levels of reproducing particular notions of citizenship and national identity. As American as apple pie, child beauty pageants are often embraced as simply good, clean entertainment and defended for their civic value to the community. Moreover, while adult beauty contests such as the annual Miss America pageant have been the target of enormous amounts of feminist criticism,⁴⁵ few academics and cultural critics have focused on child beauty pageants as a serious object of cultural analysis.⁴⁶

Henry A. Giroux

Beyond the Politics of Child Abuse

Any attempt to challenge the sexist practices and abuses at work in children's beauty pageants must begin with the recognition that pageants represent more than trivial entertainment. Valerie Walkerdine has rightly argued that popular cultural forms such as the beauty pageant offer a way for working-class girls to escape the limiting discourses and ideologies found in schools and other regulating institutions. Popular culture becomes a realm of fantasy offering the promise of escape, possibility, and personal triumph. Desire in this instance gains expression through an endless parade of highly sexualized images and narratives that not only provide the promise of erotic fantasies that "belong to them," but also constitute for these young girls an important strategy for survival.⁴⁷ According to Walkerdine, popular cultural forms such as child beauty pageants occupy a reputable public space in which preadolescent working-class girls are offered forms of identification that are appropriated as survival practices in a society stacked against them. But what Walkerdine ignores is that such fantasies are often founded on forms of identification and hope that offer nothing more than the swindle of fulfillment, providing limited choices and options to young girls. Moreover, while such strategies cannot be dismissed as politically incorrect but engaged within a broader understanding of how desire is both mediated and acted upon, the social costs for such identifications go far beyond the benefits they provide as a buffer against hard times. In the long run, such investments serve to limit, often exploit, and disrupt working-class lives. At the same time, the emergence of cultural forms such as the child beauty pageant makes clear the degree to which viable public spheres are diminishing for children. As public funding decreases, support services dry up, and extracurricular activities are eliminated from schools because of financial shortages, young people find themselves in a society in which there are very few decommodified public spheres for them to identify with and experience. As market relations expand their control over public space, corporations increasingly provide the public spheres for children to experience themselves as consuming subjects and commodities with limited opportunities to learn how to develop their full range of intellectual and emotional capacities to be critical citizens.

While many progressives are well aware that the struggle over culture is tantamount to the struggle over meaning and identity, it is also important to recognize that any viable cultural politics must also locate specific cultural texts within wider semiotic, material, and social relations of power that shape everyday life. Understood within a broader set of relations, child beauty pageants become an important object of critical analysis for a number of reasons. First, the conservative and rigid gender roles that are legitimated at many child beauty pageants must be analyzed both

in terms of the specific ideologies they construct for children and how these ideologies find expression in other parts of the culture. This suggests that the values and dominant motifs that shape beauty pageants gain their meaning and appeal precisely because they find expression in related cultural spheres throughout American society. For instance, by examining how the ideologies at work in beauty pageants circulate in advertising campaigns such as those used by Calvin Klein or in the increasing use of advertising that depicts the ideal modern American female as young, extremely thin, sexually alluring, and available, it becomes clear that the processes at work in the sexualization and commodification of young children are not altogether different from the social relations that take place in other sites in which the bodies and body parts of young girls are used to market desire and sell commodities. What often makes such connections untenable in the public eye is that innocence as a trope for doing what is best for children is appropriated by beauty pageants in the name of dominant family values even though it is precisely in its name that practices that might be seen in other contexts as abusive to children are defined within the dominant culture as simply good, clean, family entertainment.

In advertisements for Calvin Klein's *Obsession* and in his more recent jean ads, innocence becomes a fractured sign, used unapologetically to foreground children as the objects of desire and adults as voyeurs. Innocence in this instance feeds into enticing images of child-like purity as it simultaneously sexualizes and commodifies them. Sexualizing children may be the final frontier in the fashion world, exemplified by the rise of models such as Kate Moss who portray women as waifs—stick-like, expressionless, and blank-eyed.⁴⁸ Or it simply makes celebrities out of teenage models and film stars such as Ivanka Trump and Liv Tyler, who are left wondering in their waning teen years if they are too old to have a career in those culture industries that reduce a woman's talents to elusive and short-lived standards of desire, sexuality, and beauty. What connects the beauty pageants to the world of advertising and fashion modeling is that young girls are being taught to become little women, while in the adult society women are being taught to assume the identities of powerless, child-like waifs. In this instance, *Lolita* grows up only to retreat into her youth as a model for what it means to be a woman.⁴⁹ In these examples, innocence reveals a dark quality, suggesting not only that youth are being assaulted across a variety of public spaces but that their identities, especially those of young women, are being appropriated in different ways in diverse public sites for the high pleasure quotient they evoke in satisfying adult desires and needs.

As an ethical referent, innocence humanizes the child and makes a claim on adults to provide them with security and protection. But inno-

cence gains its meaning from a complex set of semiotic, material, and social registers. And the reality of what is happening to children in cultural spheres as seemingly unrelated as child beauty pageants and the world of advertising and fashion modeling suggests how vulnerable children actually are to learning the worst social dimensions of our society: misogyny, sexism, racism, and violence. Innocence needs to be understood dialectically as a metaphor that is subject to diverse appropriations and whose effects can be both positive and devastating for children. If innocence is to become a useful category for social analysis, the term must be treated as an ideological practice that can only be understood politically and ethically through the ways in which it is represented and used within everyday life as it is shaped in the intersection of language, representations, and the technologies of power. Central to such a task is the need to address why, how, and under what conditions the marketing of children's bodies increasingly permeates diverse elements of society. Similarly, the answer to such a task demands uncovering not only the political and ideological interests and relations of power at work in such processes but also the actual ways in which cultural practices influence how children and adults learn about themselves and their relationship to others.

Innocence becomes both a mystifying ideology and a vehicle for commercial profit. In the first instance, innocence is a highly charged term for promoting moral panics in the popular imagination by pointing to pedophiles and sexual perverts as the most visible threat to children in our society. Such a restricted notion of innocence fails to understand how child abuse connects to and works its way through the most seemingly benign of cultural spheres such as the beauty pageant. Under such circumstances, the beauty pageant is not only ignored as a serious object of social analysis but is dismissed as simply a subculture. Innocence in this case protects a particular notion of family values that is class specific and racially coded. In a society in which working-class youths and youths of color are represented as a threat and menace to public order, innocence becomes an ideological trope that defines itself against children constructed as "other," while reinforcing a politics of innocence that legitimates the cultural capital of children who are largely white, middle-class, and privileged. Moreover, the discourse of innocence offers little understanding of how the conditions under which children learn in specific sites such as the beauty pageant resonate and gain legitimacy through their connection to other cultural sites.

In the second instance, innocence falls prey to the logic of the market and the successful pedagogical operations of consumerism. The myth of innocence is increasingly appropriated through a transgressive aesthetics in which children provide the sexualized bait that creates images and representations that tread close to the border of pornography. In this sce-

nario, children's sense of play and social development are transformed through marketing strategies and forms of consumer education that define the limits of their imaginations, identities, and sense of possibility while simultaneously providing through the electronic media a "kind of entertainment that subtly influence[s] the way we see [children], ourselves, and our communities."⁵⁰

Concerned educators, parents, and activists must begin to challenge and counter such representations, ideologies, and social practices as part of a cultural politics that makes issues of pedagogy and power central to its project. This means taking seriously how beauty pageants and other popular cultural sites position children in terms of how they are taught to think of themselves through the images, values, and discourses offered to them.⁵¹ It also means expanding our understanding of how pedagogy is played out on the bodies of young children in pageants and how this pedagogical practice resonates with what children are taught in other cultural spheres. Central to such a challenge is the political necessity for educators and other cultural workers to pressure schools and other educational sites to treat popular culture as a serious object of analysis in the curriculum so kids and adults can learn how to both demystify such images and learn the knowledge and skills that enable them to be cultural producers capable of creating public spheres informed by representations that honor and critically engage their traditions and experiences. In ideological terms, it is crucial that forms of cultural pedagogy be developed that provide students and others with texts, resources, and performative strategies that provide a complex range of subject positions they can address, inhabit, mediate, and experiment with. Developing pedagogical practices and theoretical discourses that address how the operations of power work in sites such as beauty pageants also suggests teaching students and adults how to organize social movements at the local and national levels to pressure and boycott companies that engage in abusive practices toward children. Underlying this merging of the political and the pedagogical is the overt political goal of "enabling people to act more strategically in ways that may change their context for the better"⁵² and the pedagogical goal of finding ways for diverse groups of children and adults to work together to transform popular public spheres into educational sites that address social problems by way of democratic, rather than merely market, considerations.⁵³

In short, the socialization of children must be addressed within a larger discourse about citizenship and democracy, one that resists what Adorno calls the "obscene merger of aesthetics and reality."⁵⁴ What Adorno means here is precisely the refutation of those ideologies and social practices that attempt to subordinate, if not eliminate, forms of identity fundamental to public life to an economy of bodies and pleasures

that is all surface and spectacle. Such a discourse not only calls into question the conditions under which kids learn, what they learn, and how this knowledge shapes their identities and behavior, it also raises questions about the material and institutional relations of power that are fundamental for maintaining the integrity of public life—a condition that is essential for all children to learn to be critical participants in the shaping of their lives and the larger social order. Child abuse comes in many forms, and it has become a disturbing feature of American society. The current assault being waged on children through retrograde policy, the dismantling of the welfare state, and the pervasive glut of images that cast children as the principle incitements to adult desire suggest that democracy is in the throes of a major crisis. Surely, if democracy is to carry us forward into the next century, it will be based on a commitment to improving the lives of children, but not within the degrading logic of a market that treats their bodies like a commodity and their futures as a trade-off for capital accumulation. On the contrary, critical educators and other progressives need to create a cultural vision along with strategies of understanding, representation, and transformation informed by “the rhetoric of political, civic, and economic citizenship.”⁵⁵ The challenge to take up that commitment has never been so strained and never so urgent to confront and carry out.

Notes

1. For an insightful analysis of the myth of innocence see Marina Warner, *Six Myths of Our Time* (New York: Vintage, 1995), esp. chap. 3. Of course, the concept of childhood innocence as a historical invention has been pointed out by a number of theorists. See, for example, Philip Aries, *Centuries of Childhood* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979); and Lloyd deMause, ed., *The Evolution of Childhood* (New York: Psychohistory, 1974).

2. Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

3. *Ibid.*, esp. chap. 8. The notion that television and popular culture represent the main threat to childhood innocence is central to the conservative call for censorship, limiting sex education in the schools, restricting AIDS education, redefining the home as the most important source of moral education, and the “Gumping” of American history (in which the 1960s are often seen as the source of the country’s current social ills). The quintessential expression of this position can be found in the speeches, press releases, and writings of former secretary of education and “drug czar” William Bennett. It can also be found in legislation supported by groups such as the Christian Coalition, especially the Parental Rights and Responsibilities Act of 1995. Examples of the conservative position on child abuse, the loss of innocence, and the “poisonous” effects of popular culture abound in the popular press. See, for example, Jeff Stryker, “The Age of Innocence Isn’t What It Once Was,” *New York Times*, 13 July 1997, E3.

4. Cited in Peter Edelman, “The Worst Thing Bill Clinton Has Done,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1997, 45.

5. All of these figures are taken from two articles found on the Children's Defense Fund Website: "The New Welfare Law: One Year Later," 14 October 1997, 1–5; and "CDF, New Studies Look at Status of Former Welfare Recipients," 27 May 1998, 1–4. See also Jennifer Wolch, "America's New Urban Policy: Welfare Reform and the Fate of American Cities," *Journal of American Planning Association* 54 (winter 1998): 8–11.

6. For specific statistics on the state of youth in the United States see Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children Yearbook 1997* (Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund, 1997); Ruth Sidel, *Keeping Women and Children Last* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

7. For an analysis of the ideological underpinnings of the right-wing family values crusade see Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon, 1996).

8. For an analysis of the widespread assault currently being waged against children see Henry A. Giroux, *Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today's Youth* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997); Mike A. Males, *The Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 1996); Charles R. Acland, *Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of 'Youth in Crisis'* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995); Holly Sklar, "Young and Guilty by Stereotype," *Z Magazine*, July–August 1993, 52–61; Deena Weinstein, "Expendable Youth: The Rise and Fall of Youth Culture," in *Adolescents and Their Music*, ed. Jonathan S. Epstein (New York: Garland, 1994), 67–83; and various articles in *Microphone Fiends*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994).

9. For a brilliant analysis of how the image of the sexual predator is used to preclude from public discussion the wide range of social factors at work in causing child abuse see James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

10. For an analysis of the Supreme Court's decision see Linda Greenhouse, "Likely Repeaters May Stay Confined," *New York Times*, 24 June 1997, A19.

11. The concept of the hollow state comes from Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Birth of American Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

12. The literature on advertising and the marketing of children's desires is too extensive to cite, but one of the best examples is Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing* (London: Verso, 1993).

13. Richard Goldstein, "The Girl in the Fun Bubble: The Mystery of Jon-Benet," *Village Voice*, 10 June 1997, 41.

14. For a sustained treatment of the current assault on kids, especially those who are poor, nonwhite, and urban, see Henry A. Giroux, *Fugitive Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

15. Annie Gottlieb, "First Person Sexual," *Nation*, 9 June 1997, 26.

16. Frank Rich, "Let Me Entertain You," *New York Times*, 18 January 1997, A23.

17. Richard Goldstein, "The Girl in the Fun Bubble: The Mystery of Jon-Benet," *Village Voice*, 10 June 1997, 41.

18. Cited in Karen de Witt, "All Dolled Up," *New York Times*, 12 January 1997, D4.

19. While the statistics on children's beauty pageants vary, a number of sources cite similar figures to the ones I cite here. See, for example, Rich, "Let Me Entertain You"; Ellen Mark, "Pretty Babies," *Vogue*, June 1997, 240; Beverly

Stoeltje, "The Snake Charmer Queen Ritual Competition, and Signification in American Festival," in *Beauty Queens*, ed. Colleen Ballerino, Richard Wilk, and Beverly Stoeltje (New York: Routledge, 1996), 13.

20. Cited in Pat Jordan, "The Curious Childhood of an Eleven-Year-Old," *Life*, April 1994, 38.

21. Mark, "Pretty Babies," 240.

22. Linda Caillouet echoes a point made by many academics and journalists across the country: "Pageants have changed over the past 30 years. Grade-schoolers are wearing makeup, modeling swim wear and sashaying down runways. . . . Today's little girls' parents often invest big money in coaches to teach the children the pro-am modeling style and tornado spins. They pay for makeup artists and hair stylists to accompany the children to pageants. Some of the kids use tanning beds. Seven-year-olds have reportedly worn false teeth, false eyelashes, and colored contact lenses." See Linda Caillouet, "Slaying Has Child Pageants on Defensive," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, 14 April 1997, 1A.

23. Jordan, "Curious Childhood," 62, 68.

24. See, especially, the *Sixty Minutes* segment on child beauty pageants that aired on 18 May 1997. Also see the BBC documentary show *Under the Sun*, which aired "Painted Babies" on 31 January 1996.

25. Michael F. Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur, *Marketing Madness* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995), 79.

26. Cited in ad for "Debbrah's: Nation's Top Pageant Designers," *Pageant Life*, winter 1996, 26.

27. Elliot Zaren, "Eyebrows Lift at Child Strutting in Sexy Dresses, Makeup," *Tampa Tribune*, 14 January 1997, 4.

28. Cited in Jodi Duckett, "In the Eyes of the Beholder: Child Beauty Pageants Get Mixed Reviews," *Morning Call*, 6 April 1997, E1.

29. Duckett, "In the Eyes," E1.

30. Ellen Mark, "Pretty Babies," *Vogue*, June 1997, 283.

31. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 162.

32. *Ibid.*, 179.

33. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: Anchor, 1992).

34. Richard Goldstein, "Nymph Mania: Honoring Innocence in the Breach," *Village Voice*, 17 June 1997, 71. This is not to suggest that women and children don't mediate and resist such domination as much as to make clear the determinate relations of power that lie behind the resurrection of the nymphet in the culture.

35. Beverly Stoeltje, "The Snake Charmer Queen Ritual Competition," in *Beauty Queens*, 23.

36. Cited in Linda Caillouet, "Slaying Has Child Pageants on Defensive," 1A.

37. Cited in Duckett, "In the Eyes," E1.

38. See, for example, Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Anchor, 1991).

39. This paragraph relies heavily on comments by pediatric psychologists cited in Rebecca A. Eder, Ann Digirolamo, and Suzanne Thompson, "Is Winning a Pageant Worth a Lost Childhood?" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 24 February 1997, 7B.

40. David Elkind, "The Family in the Postmodern World," *National Forum* 75 (summer 1995): 24–28.

41. Marly Harris, "Trophy Kids," *Money*, March 1997, 102.

42. As Annette Corrigan points out, "Young girls should have the freedom to explore the unlimited possibilities of their humanity and to be valued, as men are, for much more than how they look or their capacity to stimulate desire in the opposite sex." See Annette Corrigan, "Fashion, Beauty, and Feminism," *Meanjin* 51:1 (1992): 108.

43. For an academic defense of beauty pageants as simply an acting out of community standards see Michael T. Marsden, "Two Northwestern Ohio Beauty Pageants: A Study in Middle America's Cultural Rituals," in *The Cultures of Celebration*, ed. Ray B. Browne and Michael T. Marsden (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1994), 171–80. Marsden is so intent on seeing pageants as ritualistic performances that he doesn't notice how ideological his own commentary is when focusing on some of the most sexist aspects of the pageant practices. Hence, for Marsden, bathing suit competitions simply prove that "beauty can be art." For a more complex analysis see Robert H. Lavender, "'It's Not a Beauty Pageant!' Hybrid Ideology in Minnesota Community Queen Pageants," in Ballerino et al., *Beauty Queens*, 31–46. See also Susan Orlean's insipid defense of child beauty pageants as public rituals that offer mothers pride when their daughters win and provide pageant contestants the comfort of a family "in which everyone knows each other and watches out for each other" ("Beautiful Girls," *New Yorker*, 4 August 1997, 29–36).

44. Beverly Stoeltje, "The Snake Charmer Queen Ritual Competition," in Ballerino et al., *Beauty Queens*, 13.

45. For a brilliant analysis of the different critical approaches to beauty and the politics of appearance that feminists have taken since the appearance of the first Miss American pageant in 1968 see Corrigan, "Fashion, Beauty, and Feminism," 107–22. What is so interesting about this piece is that nothing is said about child beauty pageants. This is especially relevant since many of the conceptual approaches dealing with the politics of appearance simply don't apply to six-year-olds. For instance, the notion that beauty can be appropriated as an act of resistance and turned against the dominant culture seems a bit far-fetched when talking about children who can barely read.

46. One exception can be found in the collection of essays in Ballerino et al., *Beauty Queens*.

47. Valerie Walkerdine, *Daddy's Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 166.

48. While I haven't developed in this essay the implications such depictions have for women, many feminists have provided some excellent analysis. See especially Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*. For a shameful defense of thinness as an aesthetic in the fashion industry see Rebecca Johnson, "The Body," *Vogue*, September 1997, 653–58. Johnson goes a long way to legitimate some of the most misogynist aspects of the beauty industry, but really reaches into the bottom of the barrel in claiming resentment is the primary reason that many women criticize the image of waif-like models permeating the media. Claiming that thinness is only an aesthetic and not a morality, Johnson seems to forget that within the dominant invocation of thinness as a standard of beauty there is the suggestion that overweight women are slovenly, older women are ugly, and nonwhite women are not as beautiful as the ever-present blonde-haired waifs who populate the media.

49. The classic on this issue is Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine, 1994). See also Nicole Peradotto,

"Little Women: A New Generation of Girls Growing up before Their Time," *Buffalo News*, 26 January 1997, 1F.

50. Ballerino, Wilk, and Stoeltje, introduction to *Beauty Queens*, 10.

51. For a brilliant analysis of how young girls are represented in popular culture and what is learned by them see Walkerdine, *Daddy's Girl*.

52. Lawrence Grossberg, "Toward a Genealogy of the State of Cultural Studies," in *Disciplinary and Dissent in Cultural Studies*, ed. Cary Nelson and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (New York: Routledge, 1996), 143.

53. This suggests that adults not only take responsibility for how children's identities are constructed within oppressive social relations but also that such adults support groups such as Free Children, a youth group consisting of kids between ten and sixteen years of age who are organizing at the national and international level "to help children being abused and exploited, but to also empower young people to believe in themselves and to believe that they can play an active role as citizens of this world." Craig Kielburger, "Children Can Be Active Citizens of the World," *Rethinking Schools* (summer 1997): 19.

54. Adorno cited in Geoffrey Hartman, "Public Memory and Its Discontents," *Raritan* 8 (spring 1994): 27.

55. Stanley Aronowitz, "A Different Perspective on Inequality," in *Education and Cultural Studies: Toward a Performative Practice*, ed. Henry A. Giroux and Patrick Shannon (New York: Routledge, 1998), 193.